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Women and
the Spectacle

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WOMEN AND THE SPECTACLE



BY CAROL EHRLICH

To transform the world and to change the structure of life are one and the same thing."
Strasbourg Situationists

" The personal is political."
Carol Hanisch

Anarchists are used to hearing that they lack a theory that would help in building a new society. At best, their detractors say patronizingly, anarchism tells us what not to do. Don't permit bureaucracy or hierarchical authority; don't let a vanguard party make decisions; don't tread on me. Don't tread on anyone. According to this perspective, anarchism is not a theory at all. It is a set of cautionary practices, the voices of libertarian conscience - always idealistic, sometimes a bit truculent, occasionally anachronistic, but a necessary reminder.

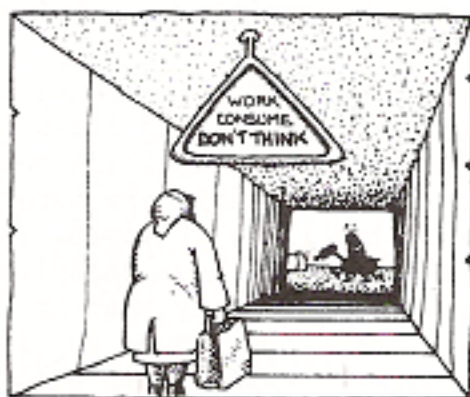
There is more than a kernel of truth to this objection. Just the same, there are varieties of anarchist thought that can provide a theoretical framework for analysis of the world and action to change it. For radical feminists who want to take

For radical feminists who want to take that 'step in self-conscious theoretical development', perhaps the greatest potential lies in Situationism.

The value of Situationism for an anarchist feminist is that it combines a socialist awareness of the primacy of capitalist oppression with an anarchist emphasis upon transforming the whole of public and private life. The point about capitalist oppression is important. All too often anarchists seem to be unaware that this economic system exploits most people. But all too often socialists - especially Marxists - are blind to the fact that people are oppressed in every aspect of life: work, what passes for leisure, culture, personal relationships - all of it. And only anarchists insist that people must transform the conditions of their lives themselves - it cannot be done for them. Not by the party, not by the union, not by 'organizers', not by anyone else.

Two basic Situationist concepts are "commodity" and "spectacle". Capitalism has made all of social relations commodity relations: The market rules all. People are not only producers and consumers in the narrow economic sense, but the very structure of their daily lives is based on commodity relations. Society is consumed as

a whole - the ensemble of social relationships and structures is the central product of the commodity economy. This has inevitably alienated people from their lives, not just from their labour; to consume social relationships makes one a passive spectator in one's life. The spectacle, then, is the culture that springs from the commodity economy - the stage is set, the action unfolds, we applaud when we think we are happy, we yawn when we think we are bored, but we cannot leave the show, because there is no world outside the theatre for us to go to.



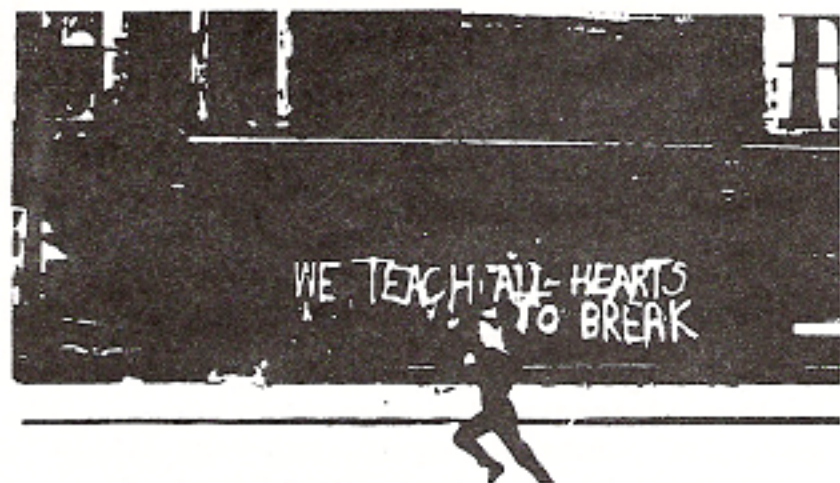
In recent times, however, the societal stage has begun to crumble, and so the possibility exists of constructing another world outside the theatre - this time, a real world, one in which each of us

directly participates as subject, not as object. The Situationist phrase for this possibility is "the reinvention of everyday life".

How is daily life to be reinvented?

By creating situations that disrupt what seems to be the natural order of things - situations that jolt people out of their customary ways of thinking and behaving. Only then will they be able to act, to destroy the manufactured spectacle and the commodity economy - that is, capitalism in all its forms. Only then will they be able to create free and unalienated lives.

The congruence of this activist, social anarchist theory with radical feminist theory is striking. The concepts of commodity and spectacle are especially applicable to the lives of women. In fact, many radical feminists have described these in detail, without placing them in a Situationist framework. To do so broadens the analysis, by showing women's situation as an organic part of the society as a whole, but at the same time without playing socialist reductionist games. Women's oppression is part of the overall oppression of people by a capitalist economy, but it is not less than the oppression of others.



Nor - from a situationist perspective - do you have to be a particular variety of woman to be oppressed; you do not have to be part of the proletariat, either literally, as an industrial worker, or metaphorically, as someone who is not independently wealthy. You do not have to wait breathlessly for socialist feminist manifestos to tell you that you qualify - as a housewife (reproducing the next generation of workers), as a clerical worker, as a student or a middle-level professional employed by the state (and therefore as part of the "new working class"). You do not have to be part of the Third World, or a lesbian, or elderly, or a welfare recipient. All of these women are objects in the commodity economy; all

are passive viewers of the spectacle. Obviously, women in some situations are far worse off than are others. But, at the same time, none are free in every area of their lives.

Women have a dual relationship to the commodity economy - they are both consumers and consumed. As housewives they are consumers of household goods purchased with money not their own, because not 'earned' by them. This may give them a certain amount of purchasing power, but very little power over any aspect of their lives. As young, single heterosexuals, women are purchasers of goods designed to make them bring a high price on the marriage market. As anything else - lesbians, or elderly, single, or self-sufficient women with 'careers', women's relationship to the marketplace as consumers is not so sharply defined. They are expected to buy (and the more affluent they are, the more they are expected to buy) but for some categories of women, buying is not defined primarily to fill out some aspect of a woman's role.

So what else is new? Isn't the idea of woman as passive consumer, manipulated by the media, patronized by slick Madison Avenue men, an

overdone cliché? Well, yes and no. A Situationist analysis ties consumption of economic goods to consumption of ideological goods, and then tells us to create situations (guerrilla actions on many levels) that will break that pattern of socialised acceptance of the world as it is. No guilt tripping; no criticising women who have 'bought' the consumer perspective. For they have indeed bought it: it has been sold to them as a way of survival from the earliest moments of life. Buy this: It will make you beautiful and and lovable. Buy this: It will keep your family in good health. Feel depressed? Treat yourself to an afternoon at the beauty parlour or to a new dress. Guilt leads to inaction. Only action, to re-invent the everyday and make it something else, will change social relations.

THE GIFT

Thinking she was the gift
they began to package it early.
they waxed its smile
they lowered its eyes
they tuned its ears to the telephone
they curled its hair
they straightened its teeth
they taught it to bury its wishbone
they poured honey down its throat
they made it say yes yes and yes
they sat on its thumbs

That box has my name on it,
said the man. It's for me.
And they were not surprised.
While they blew kisses and winked
he took it home. He put it on a table
where his friends could examine it
saying dance saying faster.
He plunged its tunnel
he burned his name deeper.
Later he put it on a platform
under the Klieg lights
saying push saying harder
saying just what I wanted
you've given me a son.

Carol Oles

Women are not only consumers in the commodity economy; they are consumed as commodities. This is what Oles' poem is about, and it is what Meredith Tax has labelled 'female schizophrenia'. Tax constructs an inner monologue for the housewife-as-commodity: "I am nothing when I am by myself. In myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children".

When feminists describe socialization into the female sex role, when they point out the traits female children are taught (emotional dependence, childishness, timidity concern with being beautiful, docility, passivity, and so on), they are talking about the careful production of a commodity - although it isn't usually called that. When they describe the oppressiveness of sexual objectification, or of living in the nuclear family, or of being a supermother, or of working in the kinds of low level, underpaid jobs that most women find in the paid labour force, they are also describing woman as a commodity. Women are consumed by men who treat them as sex objects; they are consumed by their children (whom they have produced:) when they buy the role of the Supermother; they are consumed by authoritarian husbands who expect them to be submissive servants; and they are consumed by bosses who bring them in and out of the labour force and who extract a maximum of labour for a minimum of pay. They are consumed by medical researchers who tryout new and unsafe contraceptives on them. They are consumed by men who buy their bodies on the street. They are consumed by church and state, who expect them to produce the next generation for the glory of god and country,

they are consumed by political and social organizations that expect them to "volunteer" their time and energy. have little sense of self, because their selfhood has been sold to others.

Women are 50% of the world's population, put in two-thirds of the world's working hours; receive 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of world property.

It is difficult to consume people who put up a fight, who resist the cannibalizing of their bodies, their minds, their daily lives. A few people manage to resist, but most don't resist effectively, because they can't. It is hard to locate our tormentor, because it is so pervasive, so familiar. We have known it all our lives. It is our culture.

Situationists characterise our culture as a spectacle. The spectacle treats us all as passive spectators of what we are told are our lives. And the culture-as-spectacle covers everything: We are born into it, socialized by it, go to school in it, work and relax and relate to other people in it. Even when we rebel against it, the rebellion

is often defined by the spectacle. Would anyone care to estimate the number of sensitive, alienated adolescent males who a generation ago modelled their behaviour on James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause"? I'm talking about a movie, whose capitalist producers and whose star made a great deal of money from this Spectacular.

Rebellious acts then tend to be acts of opposition to the spectacle, but seldom are so different that they transcend the spectacle. Women have a set of behaviours that show dissatisfaction by being the opposite of what is expected. At the same time these acts are clichés of rebellion, and are thus almost prescribed safety valves that don't alter the theatre of our lives. What is a rebellious woman supposed to do? We can all name the behaviours - they appear in every newspaper, on prime time television, on the best seller list in popular magazines - and, of course, in everyday life. In a setting that values perfectionist housekeeping, she can be a slob; in a subculture that values large families, she can refuse to have children. Other predictable insurgencies? She can defy the sexual double standard for married women by having an affair (or several); she can drink; or use what is termed "lockerroom" language; or have a nervous

breakdown; or - if she is an adolescent - she can "act out" (a revealing phrase:) by running away from home and having sex with a lot of men.

Any of these things may make an individual woman's life more tolerable (often, they make it less so); and all of them are guaranteed to make conservatives rant that society is crumbling. But these kinds of scripted insurrections haven't made it crumble yet, and, by themselves, they aren't likely to. Anything less than a direct attack upon all the conditions of our lives is not enough.

When women talk about changing destructive sex role socialization of females, they pick one of three possible solutions: (a) girls should be socialized more or less like boys to be independent, competitive, aggressive, and so forth. In short, it is a man's world, so a woman who wants to fit in has to be "one of the boys". (b) We should glorify the female role, and realize that what we have called weakness is really strength. We should be proud that we are maternal, nurturant, sensitive, emotional, and so on. (c) The only healthy person is an androgynous person: We must eradicate the artificial division of humanity into "masculine" and "feminine", and help both sexes become a

mix of the best traits of each.

Within these three models, personal solutions to problems of sexist oppression cover a wide range: Stay single; live communally (with both men and women, or with women only.) Don't have children; don't have male children; have any kind of children you want, but get parent and worker controlled child care. Get a job; get a better job; push for affirmative action. Be an informed consumer; file a law suit; learn karate; take assertiveness training. Develop the lesbian within you. Develop your proletarian identity. All of these make sense in particular situations, for particular women. But all of them are partial solutions to much broader problems, and none of them necessarily require seeing the world in a qualitatively different way.

So, we move from the particular to more general solutions. Destroy capitalism. End patriarchy. Smash sexism. All are obviously essential tasks in the building of a new and truly human world. Marxists, other socialists, social anarchists, feminists - all would agree. But what the socialists, and even some feminists, leave out is this: We must smash all forms of domination. That's not just a slogan, and it is the hardest task of all. It means that

we have to see through the spectacle, destroy the stage sets, know that there are other ways of doing things.

It means that we have to do more than react in programmed rebellions - we must act. And our actions must be collectively taken, while each person acts autonomously. Does that seem contradictory? It isn't - but it will be very difficult to do. The individual cannot change anything very much; for that reason, we have to work together. But that work must be without leaders as we know them, and without delegating any control over what we do and what we want to build.

Can the socialists do that? Or the matriarchs? Or the spirituality-trippers? You know the answer to that. Work with them when it makes sense to do so, but give up nothing. Concede nothing to them, or to anyone else.

"The past leads us if we force it to.
Otherwise it contains us
in its asylum with no gates.
We make history or it
makes us."

Marge Piercy

CAROL EHRLICH